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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the ways in which one teacher gathered artifacts and reflected on the progress of her first-grade students at a multi-ethnic school in the East San Francisco Bay Area. The paper emphasizes the importance of considering the social beings whose voices are embedded within the artifacts being collected. The paper uses a multi-faceted approach to assessment, examining the children's writings in three ways: (1) exploring how individual children learn the knowledge and skills which educators judge valuable for them; (2) understanding individual children's behaviors from the perspective of their emerging social goals; and (3) assessing the kinds of dynamics created by the complex network of children. In the teacher's classroom, according to the paper, five children were viewed across many contexts involving different kinds of relationships, so that it became possible to discover the texture of individual children's resources and to help them weave connections among these resources. The paper considers that children's relationships among themselves can be an important means for making school pleasurable and satisfying, and that children need opportunities to build common ground with others. The paper concludes that examining informal assessment helps educators clarify how children's social lives mingle with assessment and learning and how student problems can be understood and addressed. Two illustrations are included. (SG)

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Occasional Paper No. 28

A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON INFORMAL ASSESSMENT: VOICES, TEXTS, PICTURES, AND PLAY FROM A FIRST GRADE

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Anne Haas Dyson

September, 1991

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A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON INFORMAL ASSESSMENT: VOICES, TEXTS, PICTURES, AND PLAY FROM A FIRST GRADE

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Sarah: After the last goodbye, I close my classroom door and breathe in the quiet of a classroom at the end of the day. I walk around the classroom, stopping to pick up a crushed crayon, a crumpled paper, a pencil. I straighten books, retrieve paper math coins from a box of puzzles, and rearrange the "dinosaur table," the "wildflower table," and the "ocean" table, all centers of classroom study. As I go through my end-of-day ritual, I find the artifacts left by my first graders: Tanya's chalkboard messages, Marie and Kayla's tens and ones columns, Christina's little-girl-crossing-the-bridge picture, and Warren, Justin, and William's sorted dinosaur figures. There are the piles of journals and pictures, reading logs and classmade books.

Like the archaeologist, we as teachers live amidst the "stuff" of human life—the child creations that are evidence of a full life. These pictures, messages, displays, and records are the tangible remains of human activity, created for some purpose and embedded in complex ways into the social life of the classroom community. And also like archaeologists, we use these artifacts as materials for reflection, although, unlike them, we are allowed more direct access to human activity itself. And so to these materials, we add our own observations, captured on tape or note pad. We use these artifacts to search for patterns in how individuals participate in the learning activities of the classroom, patterns that help us understand how and what the children are learning and how we might best support that learning.

In this paper, we focus on a first-grade classroom in a multi-ethnic school in the East San Francisco Bay Area, and we discuss the ways in which Sarah, as teacher, assesses—gathers artifacts and reflects on the progress—of her children. Our perspective on informal assessment is broader and, at its core, more social than many visions of assessment. Consider, for example, one of Sarah's artifacts, a letter by DJ (Daryll) to T (Tahrique) about Justin:

Dear T Man Y
wen are You
gon to ptos x in
we aBot B Justin
love DJ

As kindergarten and primary grade teachers, many of us have become expert at figuring out the unconventional but intelligent academic efforts of young students like Daryll. We collect work samples, like Daryll's letter, record anecdotal notes, and tape students' reading, and we know too how to use such artifacts to document progress in particular skills. For example, using DJ's letter, we might comment on the visual spelling strategies

evident in his mixed-up letters in the word *stop* (*ptos*) or his *we* for *me*, the phonological awareness suggested by his *x in* for *asking*, or the reasons for his use of capital letters in odd places. However, commenting on such emerging skillfulness is only part of the picture. To understand Daryll and his ways of learning, we must somehow use our artifacts to uncover the voices that lay buried within them and, thus, to come to know the individual behind the tumbled words and the classroom relationships that gave birth to those words. Clearly, Daryll's story is intertwined with the stories of his two friends, Tahrique and Justin.

In our paper, then, we hope to emphasize the importance of considering the *social* beings whose voices are embedded within the artifacts we are collecting. Our own voices as coauthors matter too in viewing the children's social life, for we are cooperatively orchestrating the child voices readers will hear. So, we begin by discussing how we come to be collaborating within this paper and by elaborating upon our perspective on informal classroom assessment. We then introduce Sarah's classroom and give an overview of the key ways we informally assess children's learning in school. Next, we use information gathered through informal assessment to construct stories about children's classroom lives. In these stories, we will stress both the uniqueness of each child and the social linkages that energize and shape children's lives as friends and classmates. We hope providing realistic stories, filled with both insight and still puzzling questions, will provide readers with a sense of the rich possibilities of informal assessment. Finally, we close by reflecting on the importance of taking a social perspective on informal assessment, that is, of acknowledging how central human relationships are to what individual children learn in our classrooms, to the kind of classroom communities we build, and to the kind of future we imagine for ourselves and for the children.

A Dialogic Vision

As co-authors, we were first brought together by our concerns for individual children's learning and for the classroom social life that supports and hinders that learning, as we each explain below.

Sarah: One summer day in Maine, as my mother and I sat on the front porch reading the *New York Times*, she handed me Fred Hechinger's "About Education" column. It was about Anne Haas Dyson, a researcher and professor at UC Berkeley who was interested in children's academic and social lives, as revealed through their early writing and talking. As I read, I had a real sense of this classroom, the children, and this A. H. Dyson. I felt heartened that Professor Dyson thought that kids' social lives and friendships were important for their academic development. I remember reading the article and reflecting on my own first-grade classroom right outside of Washington, D.C. I was so inspired by this column that I immediately wrote to Professor Dyson. I told her how much I enjoyed the article and respected her work. Naively, I asked if she had written anything more on this early writing/talking connection. She graciously and modestly wrote back to me, sending me several articles and telling me about the educational journal *Language Arts* (in which she and Celia Genishi were the Research Currents editors). I wrote to her again inquiring about studying for an M.A. at UC Berkeley. And characteristically, she generously wrote back, encouraging

me to apply. And so quite happily I moved from the East Coast to the West Coast to study with her.

Anne: One summer day in August, as I sat wading through mail and paperwork, a new student walked into my office. I had anticipated meeting her, as she had sent me samples of her children's work, postcards of children playing, and quotes from Sylvia Ashton-Warner throughout the year. Clearly, this Sarah Merritt was a person who took great delight in her children and who also had great respect for her work as a teacher. From her letters about her students in Washington, D.C., I had learned that our views of children and of teaching had much in common. For us both, a great deal of the joy of teaching young children comes from being allowed entry into a rich and interesting world, one peopled with beings from a place now past, that of childhood; in this place, both Sarah and I had witnessed important social dramas played out in ways less masked than in our own adult worlds: "Be my friend." "I won't be your friend." During her year at the university, we talked often about how school learning figured into children's social world and about how knowing this world helped us in our work as educators. Sarah stayed in the East Bay another year to teach first grade, but now she is going home to the East Coast. Writing this paper has presented us with an opportunity to discuss formally the ideas that brought Sarah and me together and to celebrate the kind of dialogic learning that happens—for both teacher and student and at all levels of learning—when academic learning takes place amidst much sharing of experiences (and of laughter).

So we are cooperatively telling this story. Sarah sees with the eyes of the teacher who takes seriously her concerns that all children achieve the academic goals of her school as well as that doing so be socially meaningful. She worries about her decisions and her children's progress; she takes pride in their successes and is frustrated by those days when children seem lost, when friends seem leading off in paths whose productivity she questions. "Any redeeming qualities here?" she asked Anne one day as a group of children were playing (what we weren't sure), "Or should I start to worry?" Sarah knows that social relationships within the classroom can be messy, raucous, silly, fierce, and funny. She wonders, am I doing what is best for the children? Are they learning? What are they learning? Isn't it too loud in here? Are they on task or off? Are the social relationships productive or destructive? How do I support those students who seem to have a difficult time interacting with others? These are the questions Sarah brings as an active listener, knower, observer of the students in her class.

Though Anne has been a teacher, she now sees with the eyes of a researcher. She is freer to find those frustrations "interesting," those unanticipated paths "intriguing," being less directly responsible for the children's learning. And, while her questions are much like Sarah's, she is relatively more likely to wonder about the class in more distant language, to consider with Sarah the insights into teacher observation and documentation—the new perspective on assessment—that might be gleaned from discussing Sarah's own grappling with the particulars of her children's daily dramas.

So our writing has indeed been dialogic. We have pushed each other up close to Sarah's children and back again, wondering how the artifacts Sarah has gathered reveal, not only her children's learning, but the ways in which teachers themselves learn about the social and academic constraints and opportunities shaping children's classroom lives.

A Multifaceted Approach to Assessment

Our approach to assessment is multifaceted. First, we are interested in how individual children are learning the knowledge and skills we judge as valuable for them. Children learn from active engagement with the world around them, as they construct and gradually transform their understandings of the world (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Moreover, children give shape to their understandings by making use of the symbolic tools available to them in their cultures (Vygotsky, 1962). Thus, we want to understand individual children's interests, their understandings about the social and physical world, and their ways of using the tools of learning, including talk, writing, and reading.

At the same time, however, we know that individual learning takes place amidst relationships and that these important relationships include not just those between teachers and children but also among children themselves (Dyson, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978; for a practical discussion of this theoretical point of view, see Cazden, 1988). Indeed, much of the energy of a 6- or 7-year-old is spent doing "social work," that is, working to be accepted and valued by peers (Rubin, 1980). Thus, our second concern centers on understanding individual children's behaviors from the perspective of their own emerging social goals. The social life of a classroom provides an important window through which to view academic development, because each child's ease or discomfort, sense of competence or failure, of alienation or acceptance, is affected by how school figures into relationships with other people, including parents, teachers, and, as we stress here, friends.

Third, we are interested as well in assessing—monitoring the progress—of the classroom community as a whole, of the kinds of dynamics created by the complex network of children. For the relationships among children matter not only for academic goals but also for grander social goals, for a society where children feel empathy and a sense of their common good (Greene, 1988). This is particularly important in a classroom like Sarah's, which, like many urban classrooms, is filled with children who bring vastly different life experiences to school. Our challenge, then, is both to assess individuals' strengths and needs and to discover common ground—themes and interests that might foster connections among children from very different places.

Sarah's Classroom: The Riches and Challenges of Diversity

During the 1989-90 school year, Sarah's first-grade classroom reflected the rich ethnic diversity that has long characterized California. Her 28 children represented African-American, Anglo, Asian, and Hispanic ethnicities. Many came from a low-income and working-class African-American neighborhood on the southwest side of the school's attendance area, while others came from the working- and middle-class neighborhood that stretches to its northeast.

In Sarah's classroom, the children selected their own places to sit. Their seating preferences reflected the usual desires of first-grade boys to sit with boys, girls to sit with girls. While there were patches of children of similar ethnicity—a group of white boys, one of black boys—there were also friendships that crossed ethnic lines. Too, many of Sarah's children were themselves of mixed ethnicity (11 of the 28). "Ain't Xing mixed?"

asked Kayla one day, noticing, perhaps, that Xing, who was Asian American, was about the same color as Carla, who was of Mexican and Black ethnicity. "I just tan," said Xing.

In a classroom like Sarah's, it seems important to us that the children have many open-ended activities, in which individuals can participate in their own ways, using their life experiences and symbolic resources (their ways of talking, playing, writing, reading, drawing, singing). And it seems equally important that there be many group activities, where children can join together and a sense of class identity can be fostered. The central activities of Sarah's daily schedule reflected these qualities.

The morning began with journal time. On the first day the children entered Room 205, they were given a composition notebook and invited to write and draw anything they wanted to. Some simply drew, others "invented spellings" according to letter sounds. Others wrote their names. Everyone did something, and, the next day when they came to school, there were their journals on their desks. So they wrote again and began to ask their neighbors what they had written. Sarah encouraged them to read the responses she had written in each of their journals. Those who wished could share their entries with the whole class. Thus, over time, this activity came to serve both the individual and the group, both social and academic ends. Indeed, even the opening lines of their journal entries reflected these multiple ends: they often wrote "Dear Miss Merritt," "Dear Class," or Dear" and the name of a friend.

After journal time, the class read the "morning message," a letter Sarah wrote on the board to her class. The letter had both personal news and schedule information, a planned visit from "Miss Merritt's teacher and friend" (Anne), for example, an upcoming birthday party for Daryll, a compliment for a day of hard work, a wish for a good day for all. This, then, was another time for individual and group recognition.

Throughout the morning, there were many opportunities for reading and for talk, some involving the whole class, some involving small groups, and others involving "partner" reading by friends or independent reading. Whole class sessions often were for enjoying a story together, for choral reading of favorite poems and rhythmic stories and songs, and for class study of spelling patterns or handwriting forms. Smaller groups were for talking about how and what they were reading and, most importantly, for Sarah to hear individuals read and support their efforts; in these groups, she used books the school faculty had chosen for beginning readers. Independent and partner reading were for children to select and enjoy a book, together if they wished. For this activity, the children chose literature from the classroom library, which contained multiple copies of many selected children's books. The children chose their own partners and books, planned their own way of sharing the reading, and took responsibility for recording in their reading logs what they had read and their response to the book. In the beginning of the year, Sarah had children who were unconventional readers, fluently reading picture books without really looking at the print, and she had children who already read in conventional ways.

In the middle of the morning, Sarah's children took a break. Out on the playground during recess, groups formed and reformed, as the children took to the bars for climbing, hanging, and swinging, started a soccer game, and walked—or ran—in the large open spaces. When the morning work was done, and lunch was over, the children were off to the playground again. As the children's classroom experiences will reveal, the playground is also a place where significant social work takes place.

The afternoon started with a story time. At first, Sarah led this storytime, but, by the Spring of the year, the children themselves signed up to read the after-lunch story. Sarah's class studied books by E. J. Keats, L. Lionni, E. Carle, W. Steig, V. Williams,

the *Starring First Grade* series by M. Cohen and L. Hoban, and the poetry of Langston Hughes. Many times after Sarah had read a story, a student would make a connection between different characters and authors. For example, Kayla, who struggled with independent reading, noted that Leo Lionni's books have the "same kind of fishes and drawings," and she also commented on the thematic connections between *More Spaghetti I Say* and *Strega Nona*.

Moreover, the children's talk about these commonly studied books revealed the books that captured the attention of the class as a whole and served as common ground for discussion. For example, Maurice Sendak was a class favorite. Max, the central character in *Where the Wild Things Are*, was often compared to *Pierre*, the leading character in the book of the same name. Many debates were generated around those two characters. Sendak's book of months, *Chicken Soup with Rice*, served as a class favorite throughout the year. The children identified their birthday months, listened time and again to Carole King's musical version ("Really Rosie"), and made up their own verses based on Sendak's repeating refrains.

After story time came math. The class worked as a whole on new concepts, and then individuals worked side by side on math activities, while those wishing to work together and with Sarah met on the rug. The children made use of the manipulative materials that filled the math corner—the rulers, blocks, geometric sponge shapes, unifix cubes, flashcards, balance scale, and play money. Math activities were often integrated into science study units; for example, units on nutrition, plants, fruits, and seeds all involved observing, counting, estimating, graphing, measuring, sorting, and classifying.

Many of the science and social studies theme units involved literacy and art activities. The study of countries especially brought in literature, language, story, and song. While time in the afternoon was set aside for the study units, the unit threaded throughout the day, as the children's journals, book selections, and free play sometimes reflected unit themes. Moreover, the units were times for children's individual and group identities to be recognized and studied by the class as a whole. Eric and Isabella helped the class learn Spanish during the unit on Chile. Valentina's mother made a map of Chile and sang the children Spanish songs, accompanied by her guitar. Daryll brought in medallions and drums during a study of Africa, while Leaha's mother introduced the children to Chinese calligraphy and helped them make Chinese lanterns.

While child choice of activity or, within activity, of topic and work style (e.g., working alone or with classmates) was a basic part of the classroom day, a block of time was set aside in the afternoon as "free choice time," a time when students selected activities that were of special interest to them. For example, small groups of children used books or chalkboards to play school, grocery boxes and a cash register (pretend) to play store, or chairs and a large plastic lid to play taxi or "limo." Others chose to classify objects from their study units—model dinosaurs, leaves, stamps or flags from different countries. Some read, some wrote, and some wandered from activity to activity, needing a moment of planning with Sarah about exactly what to do.

It was in the context of these activities that Sarah came to know her children. While there was a standardized test that all first graders took, Sarah was honest with her children, as they were with her, about the limits of the test. She made sure that the children had practice with the format of the test—the bubbles that must be filled in, the straightforward questions. At the same time, she acknowledged the children's varied reactions to the experience—some children liked the test, some felt it was hard, and some groaned a great deal about it. Sarah told them that she learns about what they really know from observing

and listening to them. We consider these informal assessment procedures in the following section.

Tapping Children's Voices, Texts, Pictures, and Play

> Still—in a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is too small—we haven't time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.
> Georgia O'Keefe

Small flowers, like small children, take time to know. In Sarah's classroom, as in many, children's distinctive characteristics became clear over time as Sarah observed her students—and they observed each other—in the course of their daily activities. Their styles—their ways of engaging with other children and with materials—helped shape their academic learning, their network of friends, and the contributions they made to the classroom community.

The value of informally assessing children in the course of daily activities, rather than solely through their products or their performance on particular tasks like informal reading inventories or spelling dictations, is that it allows us more easily to view the flesh and bones—the voices, if you will—shaping their products and performances. When individual children participate in an activity, they are guided by some purpose, engage in some way with other people, and make use of varied media—that is, they may talk, sing, draw, read, write, and play. Being attuned to the why, with whom, and how, as well as the what, of children's efforts allows us simultaneously to view their social and academic lives.

As an observer, Sarah gave particular attention to children's ways of expressing themselves. She listened to and occasionally taped the children's *conversations* in spontaneous and structured activities; observed and kept anecdotal records of children's *play*; collected samples of children's *drawing* and *writing*; noted what, how, and with whom the children chose to *read*. None of these ways of observing alone allows a complete picture of any one child as a learner and a friend, but they each contribute to an evolving portrait, that is, they each provide artifacts for reflection.

In the next section, we present stories of the classroom lives of some of Sarah's children: Rebekah, Crystal, Daryll, Tahrique, and Justin. These stories will illustrate children learning on several levels—as individuals, as friends, and as a classroom community of learners—and they will include activities across the curriculum—language arts, social studies, science, music, and art. Further, these will be stories in which informal assessment plays a major role in teacher decisions about how best to help students learn.

The Children

We begin with a brief story of Crystal and Rebekah because their story is a relatively easy documentation of steady progress, progress connected in clear-cut ways with their friendship. Then we turn to our major stories, those of the interconnected lives of Daryll, Justin, and their friend Tahrique. Their stories are much less clear-cut, more filled with those unsettling classroom times when progress is not so easy to discern, when the energy of relationships is not so straightforwardly positive.

The Best Friends: Crystal and Rebekah

(letter from Rebekah to Crystal)
Dear Crystal, I am going to
call you. And I am going to
play with you. And I am happy about it.
love,
Rebekah

(note from Crystal to Rebekah)
Crystal
443-5867
You better
remembr
it

Crystal, who was African American, and Rebekah, who was Anglo, began the school year as strangers. By chance, they ended up sitting back to back at nearby tables. Within days, they were the best of friends. The above exchange, which took place through written notes, was a typical one for them and suggests the interplay between their social and academic growth. "I am going to call you," writes the straightforward Rebekah. "Well then, here's my number," responds Crystal.

Indeed, over the course of the year, the children's journals, which Sarah routinely saved upon completion, reflected the girls' growing friendship as well as their developing encoding skill and the increasing complexity of their messages. They began by writing each other's names; in Crystal's journal, *Rebekah* appeared amidst hieroglyphic-appearing letters, while Rebekah declared "I Loek Crystal a lot." Soon both girls were declaring their affection for each other. Later in the year, they used known words and invented spelling to write letters asking each other questions. "How many grandmothers do you have?" wrote Rebekah to Crystal. "Lots" wrote Crystal back. "Lots?" asked the surprised Rebekah. "I have hundreds of grandmothers," said Crystal, "[of course] some of 'em are dead."

When school began, Rebekah was an independent child, who, unlike many of her classmates, didn't need constant feedback from Sarah. Rebekah consulted with Sarah on her chosen, free-time activities, but she was serious and confident about her own work and explored the classroom—and its child inhabitants—on her own.

Rebekah was also an eager book lover. Indeed, in the first few weeks of school, she frequently asked Sarah if there would be free-reading time. During free-choice periods, she consistently chose to read books in the classroom library, rather than to work puzzles, draw, or work at a study unit activity. This love of reading was confirmed by her father and her kindergarten teacher. By listening to Rebekah read her chosen books, Sarah learned that Rebekah could read some books conventionally, unlike the less conventional readers, who did not necessarily attend to text, match voice and print, or read in a book-like register. When she didn't know a word, Rebekah consistently tried to figure it out, using semantic (meaning), syntactic (sentence structure) and graphophonic (sound/symbol) cues, as well as her knowledge of the kind of book she was reading.

Rebekah's love of reading was demonstrated in her journal as well. She compiled lists of books in the classroom library and of those which she had read. She was comfortable writing, although it was a relatively new experience for her. Right from the start, she wrote with a clear voice, often about her feelings for her family. And, within the first week of school, she also wrote about her new friend Crystal:

I loek [like] Crystal
a lot She loeks
me to

Unlike Rebekah, who was on the verge of conventional writing and reading, was the very determined Crystal. Consider her first journal entry (see Figure 1). Crystal was not a shy girl in school, and she wanted to share her journal writing with her classmates. A girl who spoke her mind, requested help, and explained and defended her positions, Crystal got up and shared her entries by making up a story on the spot. When the children asked to see her journal and the picture she had made, Crystal explained that "all I do is write. I don't draw no pictures." Thus, she did not expose the fact that her writing was very unconventional.

Sarah was concerned about Crystal's writing and reading, but she also wanted to give her time and space to write in her own ways. Her classroom aide decided to ask Crystal to write "real letters." Characteristically, Crystal objected. In a very exasperated tone, she let Mrs. Puckett know "I am writing! Gosh! What do you want from me? I am writing. I'm going to start writing on the line when I am 9."

But, sure enough, by the second week of school Crystal wrote:

I L U Rebekah
Rebekah
Crystal

Accompanying her entry was a picture of two happy little girls amidst hearts, stars, and a few words Crystal had copied, like *cat* from the alphabet picture chart. Crystal soon began copying the "morning message" from the board and, by October, she was writing full page stories using invented spellings. Her first attempt at conventional (alphabetic) writing occurred right after the earthquake we experienced in October of 1989 (see Figure 2):

IYSofrmy
Grmoshs.
Iyntrfc
AIySGtWstvy
Iwsgtbodttbl
[I was over my
Grandma's house
in the earthquake
And I was going to watch TV
I was going to be under the table (!)]

When Crystal shared this entry, Sarah noticed that Crystal carefully read her written words with great pride. Sarah recorded Crystal's reading in small print on her journal to mark this significant change in Crystal's reading and writing behaviors.

Just as Crystal's as well as Rebekah's growth as writers and as friends was reflected in their daily writing journals, so too their growth as readers and as friends was reflected in Sarah's observations of their daily book reading. The girls' joint history as literature readers formally began one day when Sarah, noting that they were already writing and reading together during journal time, asked Rebekah to pick a story to read to Crystal. She chose one of the Leo Lionni books, *Swimmy*. This was the beginning of a shared activity that lasted the entire year. During free choice time, the children could often be

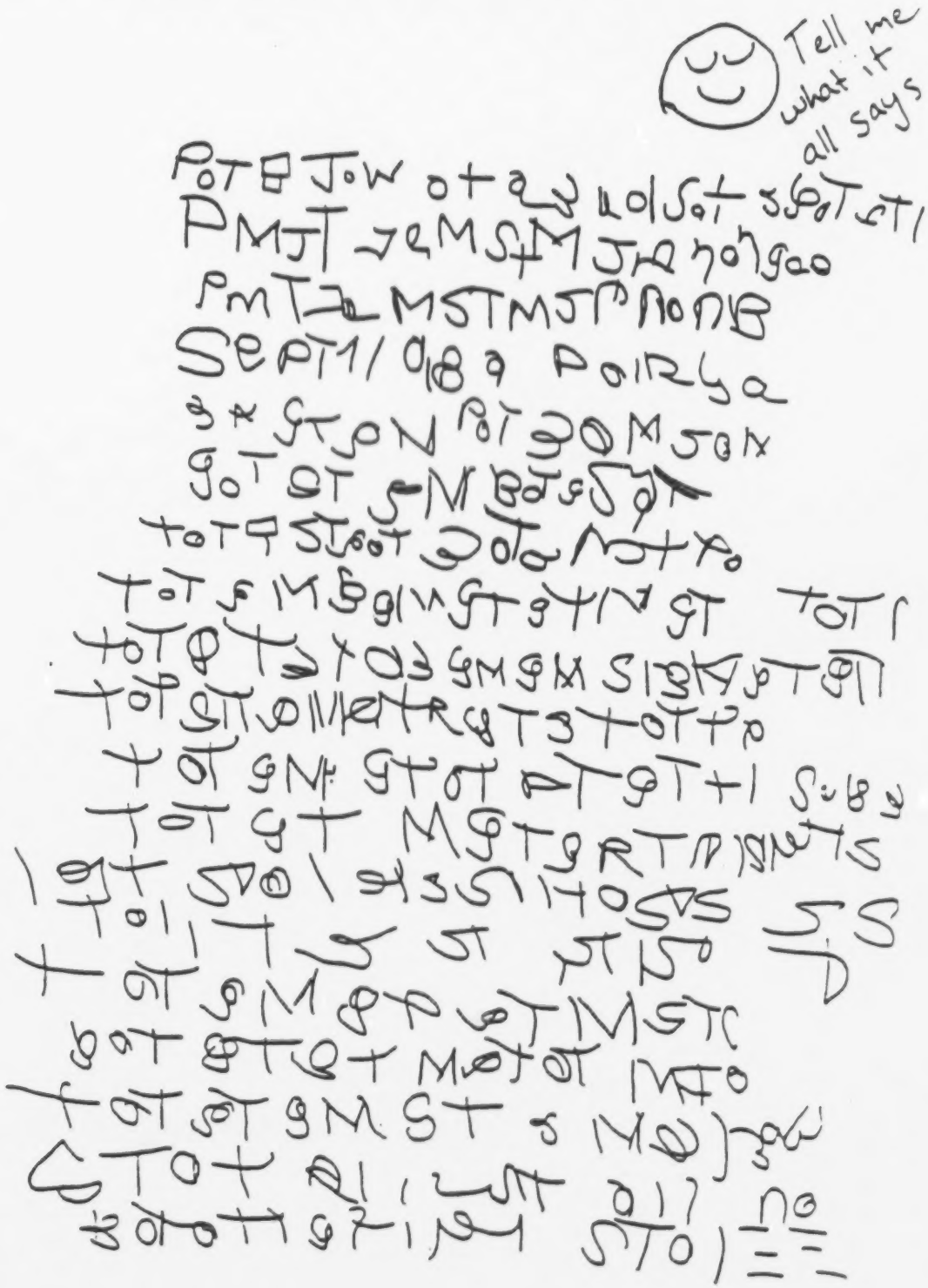

Figure 4.1. Crystal's first journal entry.

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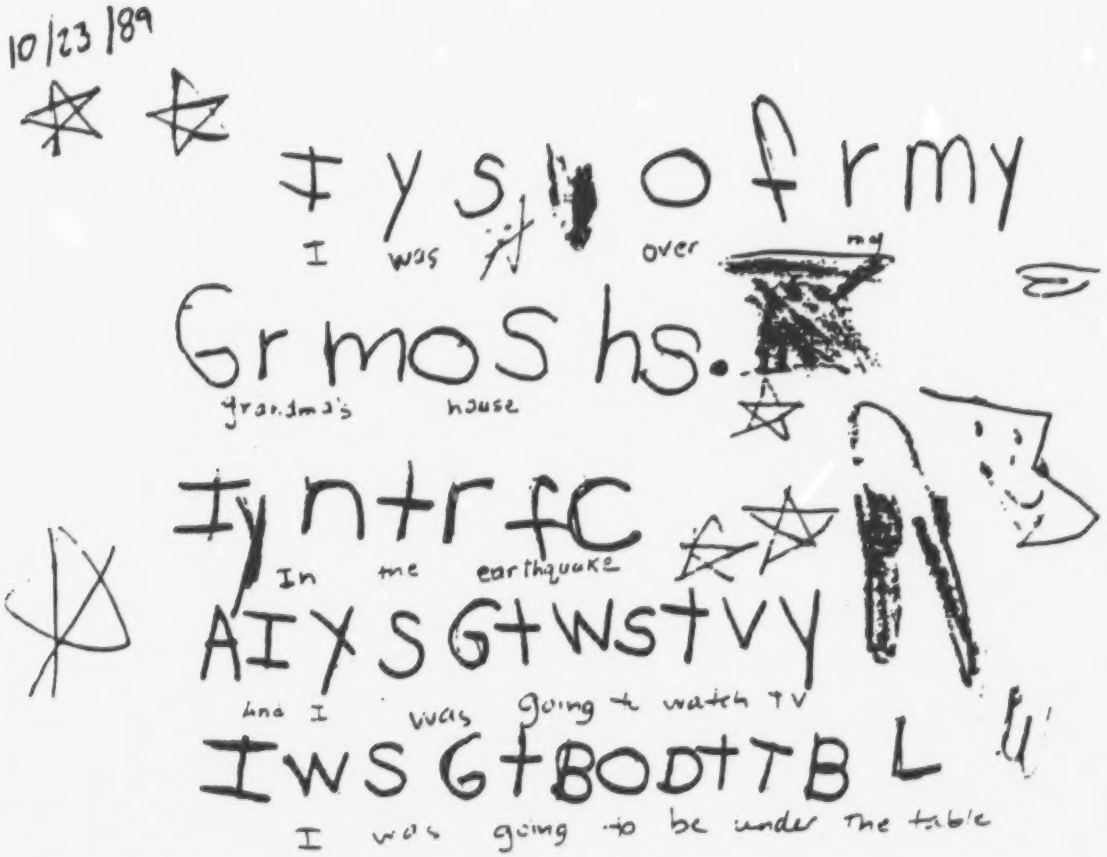

Figure 4.2. Crystal's earthquake entry.

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found reading side by side. They would read to each other or they would read the same book chorally.

Sarah could not always attend to Crystal's and Rebekah's reading, but she could and did ask them about their reading procedures. When the girls first started reading together, Rebekah explained that Crystal read by guessing from the pictures. Rebekah would gently tell her, "No. Like this," and then Rebekah would read the page. Crystal would nod and then repeat the page after Rebekah. There seemed to be no tension, no feelings of competition, in this activity. Crystal wanted to "really read." And Rebekah helped her in a straightforward, patient manner. Friends. And, while Crystal did not begin to attend to and figure out words herself until the third month of school, she considered herself a reader because of the friend she kept. Indeed, by the end of the year, they were *both* among the strongest readers and writers in the classroom.

During free-choice time, Sarah noted that, if Rebekah and Crystal weren't reading together, they could be found playing school. Sometimes their classroom consisted of just two people: Rebekah and Crystal, with Rebekah most often in the role of teacher. More often, however, several girls and a few boys would join them. In that case, Crystal and Rebekah became co-teachers. Sharing authority, they would routinely line up chairs in front of the blackboard, write a morning message, and read it to their students. Then, they would flip through the many pages of chart paper tablets, reciting class poems (using the pointer, of course). They might also give math problems, praising or scolding their students accordingly. To get their beloved reading time in, they would read aloud to their students from a favorite storybook. Rebekah and Crystal seemed to take great pride in having their "classroom" be a realistic, orderly place.

Not only did Crystal and Rebekah take the lead in introducing "school" to the play life of the children in Room 205, their intertwining of their academic and social lives sparked a favorite classroom writing activity. Crystal and Rebekah were the first students to write to each other in their journals. One day Rebekah stood in front of the class to share her journal and read aloud:

Dear Crystal,
do you like me yes or no
I like you
I do yes
I do

And then Rebekah gave Crystal the journal so that she could circle yes or no. This peer writing activity became quite the rage for a month or so, surfacing and resurfacing throughout the year. (For a resurfacing, see the Boy Kings' use of it, pp. 26-27.)

Crystal and Rebekah's friendship was rooted in an academic partnership. They considered themselves to be "good students," and they enjoyed the challenges of school life. We now turn to a tale of a threesome that was in many ways more challenging than that of Crystal and Rebekah, that of Daryll, Justin, and Tahrique. Theirs was a story in which informal assessment would play a more critical role. These three students were by no means "lacking" or "slow," but, unlike Crystal and Rebekah, they did not consider themselves good students. They tended to avoid academic tasks and sought their most prized success in a kingdom dominated by boy kings.

The Boy Kings: Daryll, Justin, and Tahrique

Justin and Daryll began the year in Room 205, although Justin did not attend school regularly until January. Tahrique entered the classroom in January. In the sections to follow, we concentrate on first Daryll and then Justin, the two children who were members of the class the longest. However, as will become clear, the classroom stories of the three boys, all African-American, are complicated and intertwined, as each child's actions influenced and was influenced by those of the others and, indeed, of the class community as a whole.

Listening to Daryll's classroom talk. Daryll's progress during this first-grade year was linked to both his interactions with key friends and with his active involvement with the classroom community as a whole. We focus on Daryll's classroom talk, his journal drawing and writing, his play, and his reading, aiming to illustrate the importance of teacher sensitivity to individual children's social lives as well as to their academic knowledge and skills.

In the beginning of the year, Daryll was an attentive but quiet student, seemingly quite shy in front of the class as a whole. He was drawn more fully into the community life of Room 205 and, indeed, began to become a significant classroom figure, when he brought his out-of-school interests into the "public" arena. Sarah was able to unlock a key moment in Daryll's entry into more active classroom life by attending to and encouraging talk about those interests.

This key moment, which happened in late November, occurred during the class study of Africa. On this day, the children were locating the names of many African countries on a map and talking excitedly. "I found Chad. I know a boy named Chad. He goes to another school." "I see two countries that begin with Z—Zaire and Zimbabwe." "Yeah! I see two that begin with M—Mozambique and the island one—Madagascar." "I see the word mad in Madagascar." "My brother's name is a lot like that one"—pointing to Kenya [Kenny]. "Michael Jackson has a song called Liberian girl—is that Liberia?" (pointing to both Liberia and Libya) "Which country treats the black people like slaves?" "Where is the desert?" "Ghana is the country that Anasi [the Spider] lives in." "I know a boy—he's my friend. He comes from Ethiopia."

It was in the midst of this talk, all this blending of personal experiences into the classroom experience, that Daryll raised his hand. He asked if he should bring in something from Africa. Sarah had indeed encouraged the children to bring in anything they had from countries they were studying—coins, books, dolls, clothing, and such. So she said that he certainly should bring in African things. He then explained that he had a necklace with the shape of Africa on it. Several other kids joined in, saying they too had these African medallions. Justin explained that he could get a "whole mess" of the medallions—enough for the whole class—at the local flea market. The children began talking about the flea market, which indeed had many African booths, and about the men who danced and played the African drums. "You see them playing those drums—banging all day long." "Yeah and you see 'em dance. Wearing those turbans and all." "Singing and drumming and dancing."

While these conversations were going on, Daryll told the class that his brother had some African drums, which he would bring in—if his brother would let him.

"Do you know how to play them, Daryll?" asked one of the children.

"A little," Daryll replied modestly.

The next day, wearing a painted leather medallion of Africa around his neck, Daryll sat in the teacher's chair and demonstrated his African drums. The children were very excited, most giggling to see Daryll sitting in that chair with drums between his knees. He began to play them—slowly and steadily. The kids clapped the same rhythm and began to dance on their knees, and Daryll started beating the drum faster. The drum and medallion stayed in the classroom for the month of Africa study. Daryll was often asked to play his drums, and it was almost always accompanied by wild dancing and chanting.

Observing Daryll write. Another significant change in Daryll's social and academic life in Room 205 occurred in early January; this change was tied to Tahrique's entrance to the class, and it was revealed through Daryll's writing. A friendly student, Tahrique immediately wanted to be friends with Justin and Daryll. Apparently, Tahrique would always ask Daryll about Justin—where he was, what he was doing, if Daryll had seen him yet, and so forth. Daryll was getting desperate—he was tired of having to answer endless questions about Justin. Finally Daryll wrote a letter to Tahrique asking him when he would stop asking about Justin (see p. 1).

This was a significant change in Daryll's writing. Up until then, Daryll had rarely strayed from writing one or two words to label a Ninja Turtle or superhero he had drawn. To learn of his social world, Sarah had to listen to the talk that went on *around* the journal drawing and writing. For example, Daryll's drawing of a dinosaur and his accompanying label (T-Rex) did not capture his ongoing discussion of the dinosaur's distinctive features with Tahrique and Justin. Nor did it capture how Daryll's talk invited his good friends into the activity or how the boys offered each other encouragement, advice, and laughter.

With his letter, Daryll revealed that he certainly did understand that writing itself could serve a variety of social purposes. He wrote seeking information and, indeed, making a sort of plea. Daryll's note then was important to Sarah on two levels: it revealed Daryll's knowledge of the variety of purposes and uses of written language; and it also revealed something of the social networking of her children. Daryll's journal entries began to change from mostly pictures to mostly words, from lists and labels to personal letters.

This change was supported not only by his friendship with Tahrique and Justin, but also by his attraction to Carla, a very popular class member. In early January, when the children chose seats, Justin and Daryll chose to sit by each other—and by Carla as well. Daryll began to use his journal to issue written invitations to Carla, Justin, and Tahrique to write back or talk directly to him, for example:

Dear Tahrique
dot [don't] You like
Carla
dot [don't] You like
Her [her] Four 'a
Girl friend?
loveD

His strategy had quite an impact on Carla, Tahrique, and Justin, but it also influenced the entire classroom community. Daryll's resurrection of this writing technique (no doubt influenced by Crystal and Rebekah's use of it) was much admired and copied in the classroom. Soon other friends were asking questions aloud during sharing journal time and demanding answers. "Do you like Me—yes or no?" "Can you play with me at lunch?" "Can you play with me after school?" Consequently, these changes revealed growth in individual students and served as a bond of togetherness for all the students.

(Other bonds of togetherness were chorally saying "to be continued" if someone's journal entry for the day was not finished, asking through the journal if the class could "see" things, for example, "Do you see that my tooth has fallen out? Do you see my new shoes?")

Attending to Daryll's interactions with close friends. As Daryll's journal began to figure more dynamically into his social life, it also began to allow Sarah new perspectives for making sense of how Daryll and his two good friends participated in the life of the classroom. The most revealing entry was made in early March, when Daryll wrote the following entry:

> Tahrique is 2 to King Friend
> Justin is 1 King Fiend
> I AM 3 three
> love Daryll TZX
> [three drawn diamonds]
> 1J 2T 3D

Daryll was using his friends' initials, but to what did the numbers refer? The very feel of the entry was like a coded graffiti. With Daryll's permission, Sarah read the entry and showed the picture to the class. The children were puzzled too. Daryll began explaining—but was quickly drowned out by Tahrique and Justin.

"Well, you see, Miss Merritt," said Tahrique," it's like this. We are like kings. Justin is the first king, I'm second, and Daryll is third."

"What is a king?" Sarah asked.

The boys explained that it was like being the leader of the school. Sarah asked if this meant that Justin was the best king because his number was one. The three boys nodded yes. Sarah asked if she could be a king. That got the boys and the rest of the class laughing. Tahrique and Daryll agreed through their laughter that Sarah could be a king—Miss M, King 4. But Justin interrupted and said that she would have to "pass the tests like everybody else" if she was to be a real king.

"Pass tests?" she asked.

Justin explained that during recess, they had to do tests like doing back flips, doing splits, performing a new dance, saying the words to a current song on the radio and doing the accompanying dance steps, running a race, and sliding down the playground pole. It sounded like an obstacle course with Justin running the show and announcing which tests were next.

Through the talk engendered by the journal, Sarah was led to observe the boys' daily recess rituals. Justin (a.k.a. Boy King #1) would run around the yard behind his line of kings, coaching them, yelling the next task, and clapping his hands, as any concerned coach would do. Further, these observations of the boys in their own world allowed Sarah access to the deep roots of this sometimes fragile threesome. This knowledge allowed Sarah to consider ways of structuring learning experiences that would allow her to work with the children's energy rather than to ignore or attempt to undermine it. It was not so easy, however, to know how to translate this knowledge into ways of structuring the children's social networking within the class to support both individual learning and the class community as a whole.

Listening to the boy kings read. The complex nature of the decisions Sarah, like all teachers, made about ways of supporting individuals and groups is best illustrated by considering Daryll's reading. By the time Tahrique entered Sarah's class in January, Daryll was becoming a more confident, more fluent reader. In fact, one day while Daryll was reading to Sarah, he looked up and commented, "I'm reading good, huh?" He and Tahrique, whose reading was similar, were suitable reading partners, provided that Sarah or Mrs. Puckett kept an ear out for them. (Although they were very good at picking books that were the right level for them, they would at times get too silly, seemingly forgetting the purpose of their activity.)

In the following event, Daryll and Tahrique are reading *The Napping House*. They are taping it, which means that they have practice-read it at least once. They are reading it quietly. And they are having fun, playing with the tone of voice they are using. However, shortly into their reading, Justin hears them and decides to join:

Daryll:	(reading) There is a house a napping house where everyone is sleeeeeeping. (giggles from the two boys)
Tahrique:	(reading) And in that red house there is a bed a cozy bed in a napping house where everyone is sleeping! (singing the repeated refrain)
Justin:	(laughing and moving to join the reading) My turn. Where are we, right here? Right here? (general discussion of where they are and whose turn it is)
Justin:	And in (much laughter)
Tahrique:	And IN!
Justin:	And in that bed there is a gr ... (again much laughter)
Tahrique & Daryll:	A granny ...
Tahrique:	Dojy Dottie da da da (sing-song voice quality) Where everyone is slee eep ing!!!
Justin:	How ya doin girl? How you livin'? Are ya fine? Are ya stinkin'? Are you ugly? Are you honey? Hey babe. Bye Bye. That was Daryll. (Much laughter and confusion over who has the mike.)
Daryll:	(Noble attempt to get back on task) And on that bed there was a cat ...

Sarah overheard this last bit of bravado and intervened. It was the end of the taping session for the day. Daryll and Tahrique were a little miffed at not getting to finish. Justin was relieved to be done with his reading. And Sarah considered it a session gone bad, something that seemed to happen whenever Justin entered the reading scene.

In the next section, we turn to the talk, play, writing, and reading of Justin, illustrating how observation from all three perspectives—the individual, the peer group, the class as a whole—allowed Sarah to make sense of and to support Justin's learning.

Attending to Justin's social life. A popular child with both boys and girls, during free choice Justin could be found drawing with Daryll and Tahrique, playing store with the girls, or in the dinosaur center with Warren or William. Justin was always in charge. For example, when he played store with the girls, he was the Daddy. Sometimes he was a nice Daddy, sometimes a demanding one. The girls seemed to like to have him play in either role, as long as he played. Justin would set up chairs as if they were seats in a car. "OK," he would say, "pretend I'm really nice and I'm gonna take all you kids to the store to get whatever you want." (Even children who weren't playing in the store game stopped to listen to Justin as he set the scene.) Justin would then make himself a wheel and drive that car to a store some 100 miles away. He would talk to his "kids" about their behavior and ask his wife to get out the sandwiches and sodas for the kids.

During outside play, Justin, as already suggested, had authority over the four or five boys he played with. (Daryll and Tahrique were always with him at recess, as were two or three other boys from different first-grade classrooms.) A strong performance was important for Justin, Boy King #1. The tests or tasks he and his two friends played out were different from most educators' assessments. However, at their core, the children's tests, like the kinds of teacher assessments we are discussing, were concerned with valuing certain goals, trying to achieve them, being able to make others believe in oneself as a competent person, and believing in and feeling good about oneself. At the very least their tests helped make us sympathetic to those who feel defeated from the very start when being assessed in a way that is perceived as unfair—certainly Sarah and, most certainly, Anne could not pass Justin's tests.

Observing Justin read and write. Understanding the role Justin assumed in his play helped Sarah to understand his behaviors during reading and writing and to understand too why taking advantage of the social energy of the three boy kings was not so easy. Although Justin was a clear social leader, he was not an academic one. Justin was retained once in first grade for excessive absences. He did not seem to think of himself as "school smart." He would often tell Sarah or one of his peers that he didn't feel like doing the work because it took too long to do—or it was too hard or boring. Justin spent a great deal of time avoiding academic tasks or wandering around the room, trying to find something to do that he felt he could succeed at.

Justin sometimes seemed to use his skills as a lively talker to circle around, rather than engage in, activities. For example, he often took a long time settling into the act of writing because he had to check in with everyone. He had to check out his main men—Daryll and, after his arrival, Tahrique. He had to check with the girls at his table—did they have his pencil, his crayons, his dinosaur book? Did Daryll hear M. C. Hammer's latest hit last night? Did he play kickball before coming into school? After a few requests from Sarah to get his work done, Justin would settle in. He usually found a book on his current interest—dinosaurs, racing cars, picture books—drew a picture from it and then copied two or three words from the book into his journal. Meanwhile, his talk was usually not related to what he was drawing or writing about.

Reading was his most difficult and thus avoided academic task. Yet, listening to his talk during study units allowed Sarah to create moments when Justin seemed comfortable with himself as a reader and writer and as a participant in the academic life of the class. Early in the school year, Justin shared with the class that his older brother was a musician. He brought in a tape of his brother singing rap songs. Indeed, Justin was capable of becoming "Boy King" #1 because of his ability to sing songs well—to remember the lines and rhymes.

Repetition and rhyme support many young children's comfort with, and willingness to engage with, the intricacies of the printed word and their attempts to accurately match voice and print. Children may choose texts with repetitive, predictable patterns that have been read many times to the class to "really read," while they may invent—or, in Justin's case, avoid—stories for more difficult books. Knowing that Justin liked music allowed Sarah to help Justin find reading materials that would support his interaction with the text.

Many class study units (e.g., dinosaurs, sea animals, Spanish, Civil Rights) involved songs. Justin loved leading the class in these songs. Usually, Sarah wrote the words to the songs on large chart paper so the children could read the words as well as sing them. Justin would always volunteer to go up and point with the pointer to the words as they sang. Sometimes, during free choice, he would take the pointer, line up several children in chairs in front of the chart paper, and lead them in singing/reading. Daryll, Tahrique, and he also made a rap book, composed of rap lyrics known by most members of the class, which Justin enjoyed reading.

Thus, Justin's interest in and knowledge about music not only allowed him reading practice, it also allowed him to assume leadership roles in academic areas. In fact, one day Sarah and the class were trying to remember the four instruments a guest musician had come in and played. They were all stumped after remembering two of the instruments. Justin spoke up and said they should look on the cassette she left behind—that usually the instruments were listed there. Sure enough, the instruments she played were on the cassette box. Justin had proved a good researcher!

Justin's interest in songs also translated into his journal writing. For example, Justin drew pictures of Rosa Parks and Dr. M. L. King, Jr., both civil rights leaders featured in a song that Justin continually sang to himself during the Civil Rights study unit. In fact, when the music teacher first sang a song about "Sister Rosa," Justin told her that he'd heard it on the radio. The music teacher was obviously pleased with this spontaneous connection. Further, Justin wrote rap songs in his journal, for example:

> get up in get get down
> 911 is joke in your Town
> Justin King 1

Attending to the interplay of Boy King #1's social and academic lives. Through observing Justin's play and listening to his talk, Sarah was able to create situations for Justin to experience both individual success and satisfying participation in the classroom community. Further, the social energy amidst Justin and his main men sometimes could be channeled into academic tasks that were relatively open-ended, like the journal activity, or involved familiar materials, like the chart songs and rap book. However, as already illustrated, the three boys did not do well during independent partner reading, unlike the very successful partnership of Rebekah and Crystal. There was too much tension to prove oneself, too little cooperation. The boys became very critical of one another and, at the same time, more and more unsure of themselves as readers—and less and less involved in reading. After the initial anger, the boys would laugh and forget about reading.

Sarah tried pairing Justin with a more capable peer reader, but he would sulk and refuse to read; he understood why he was paired with that person—and he resented it. As Daryll illustrated how important a student's evaluation of himself can be, Justin illustrated that the student is often his own worst critic. He was full of assessment-like comments

about himself. "I messed up." "I can't draw." "That book is too hard for me to read." "Can I go to the bathroom?"

As a social leader, Justin did not want it known that he had a hard time reading and writing. He preferred to read with an adult, a well-known adult, who would support his efforts. In fact, with an adult there to support and to help regulate the reading, and with a manageable book, the three boy kings could indeed enjoy reading together, which Sarah discovered one day when the boys seemed to be taking a taxicab ride nowhere. Anne was visiting on that day, and she noted both the cab ride and the subsequent reading activity in her notebook.

Sarah had given the children a number of activity choices during a morning work period. They could write in their journals, draw, partner read, play in the store, write Daryll birthday cards, play with the dinosaurs, or work on math. A large group of children, however, chose to go for a taxi ride. Justin was the driver. Crystal, Diandra, Tiffany, and Tahrique were also in the taxi. Sarah was having serious doubts about the learning potential of this day's ride (although Anne wanted "to see where they were going"). The taxi seemed headed nowhere and its ride was becoming increasingly bumpy, and so Sarah intervened.

She asked Justin to come and read to her. He did not want to, but he came reluctantly when she explained that he would be allowed to return to his free choice after a story. His friends were obviously disappointed that the ride had come to an end but they quickly moved on to other things.

Justin and Sarah settled at his seat and took out his literature reader. She pointed out that he had already read two stories from this book—"The Little Red Hen" and "The Great, Big, Enormous Turnip." This seemed to give him a sense of accomplishment, and so she asked him to read "Dog House for Sale." It was a story that most students enjoy, and one with a familiar story line. Sarah and Justin weren't even to the third page of the story when Daryll appeared and asked if he could read along. A minute behind him was Tahrique. After initially struggling to get the newcomers on the right page, the boys settled into their turn-taking pattern. As they read, they supplied each other with needed words, and Sarah directed their attention to varied clues too, for example, an initial sound here, a reference to the sentence sense in another. Moreover, she established a low-key, supportive atmosphere, one where any insults, playful or otherwise, would be inappropriate. And, since Justin was clearly engaged with the text, Sarah was able to observe his ways of interacting with the text—of making use of orthographic, syntactic, and meaning-based cues, of predicting and commenting on the evolving action—much more easily than she could in the partner reading episodes.

To both of us, this seemed a significant episode. When we talked about the experience later in the week, we were struck by the contrast between the "Dog House for Sale" experience and "The Napping House" experience, where Justin's social agenda and academic uncertainty had seemed to interfere with what had been a socially and academically successful partnership between Daryll and Tahrique. The contrast between the events highlighted for us children's different academic and social needs.

As much as we value children's social lives and respect the power of peer talk to support children's learning, we realize that, at times, a teacher-structured situation can be more satisfying than a peer-directed one. Many of Sarah's students needed much less support during reading than Justin did. Their talk and writing about their reading suggested real engagement with a book. Moreover, they enjoyed opportunities for sharing a book with a peer. Justin, however, avoided them. For him, reading was a difficult and

(as he perceived it) a demeaning act. He felt himself judged by his peers and by Sarah—and he wasn't proud of his reading performance. Sarah had to provide time and space for Justin to feel successful as a reader, as he needed safety from humiliation when learning or practicing new tasks. During this episode, Sarah was able to do these things—and then she stuck to her word and let him have his free time, taxi and all.

Justin himself demonstrated his own sensitivity to others' need for face-saving, for support, as Sarah noted when she heard this talk during morning journal time:

> Diandra walks in. She is hiding her face in her hands. She is crying. She slinks to her table and lays her head in her arms. She is crying.
>
> Daryll: What's the matter, Diandra?
>
> Justin: What's the matter with her?
>
> Daryll: What's the matter, Diandra? (Diandra doesn't look up; she just sniffles.)
>
> Sarah: I think she is wearing her new glasses. She's a little shy about having them.
>
> (Diandra cries louder.)
>
> Daryll: You got glasses, Diandra? Don't be shy. You still look cute.
>
> Justin: Yeah! You can still be my girl, anytime. Don't cry, Diandra. I'd be glad to have some new glasses. They could help you see. Then you'd be drawing and reading real good.
>
> Whitney: Yeah. I wish I had glasses.
>
> Daryll: Crystal has glasses and she's OK with them. 'Member she didn't like 'em?
>
> Justin: Yeah. That's right. And now she's wearin' 'em everyday. Look, Diandra. Crystal's got glasses. Don't cry.
>
> Diandra raises her head and reaches for a pencil.

Seeing Justin in varied situations, paying attention to how he expressed himself through play, talk, pictures, and text, allowed a clearer, a truer, picture of him. Yes, he was a student who struggled with reading and writing, but he was also a student who took pleasure in words—who could memorize lines and deliver them dramatically. And he was also one who was curious about the world—who was intrigued by dinosaurs, sharks, whales, and racing cars and, thus, by the content of books.

Moreover, it was helpful to consider not only his individual progress but his relationships with his friends and, indeed, with the class as a whole. At the end of the year, when Sarah assessed Justin's progress in school, she considered that he no longer had a truancy problem. He came to school every day. That was extremely important. After all, he had been retained a whole year because of poor attendance. Further, she noted that he was considered a leader in the class—not an outcast. His kindergarten teacher, a

very dedicated woman, told Sarah that she would consider that a very significant aspect of his school life assessment. Justin *was* considered an outcast in his first years of school. Not only did he seldom attend school, he usually was not clean. The children did not want to be near him. During his year in Room 205, Justin became Boy King #1. His friends supported him and wanted him to be a part of their lives.

Conclusions: The Ways of the Teacher-Archaeologist

Crystal, Rebekah, Tahrique, Daryll, and Justin are unique individuals whose lives, as fellow members of Room 205, were intertwined in complex ways. Through our discussion of those lives, we have aimed to illustrate the potential of informal assessment to help teachers gain a broader and fuller picture of each child. Especially for children like Justin, whose standardized test scores would suggest only incompetence, informal assessment is a powerful teacher tool for seeing competent children and for understanding the interests, knowledge, and concerns that underlie their sometimes puzzling and frustrating behaviors.

Educators may best tap the power of informal assessment, and thus gain richer, more complex visions of children, by appreciating its multifaceted nature. To these ends, we constructed our stories of children from artifacts and observations that allowed us to view individuals across many contexts involving different kinds of relationships. We emphasized, first, viewing individual children in different kinds of activities. In this way we as educators may discover the texture of individual children's resources and help them "weave" connections among them (Dyson, 1990). For example, knowing about Justin's interest in and knowledge about music and his skill as a singer gave Sarah new possibilities for involving Justin in classroom activities. Indeed, it allowed Sarah to help Justin, Boy King #1, to assume leadership roles in academic activities, including literacy activities.

With the mention of the boy kings, we have introduced our second emphasis. Early childhood educators have long been concerned with putting the child at the center of the curriculum and, moreover, with careful observation of the child's interests and activities. But when we put one child at the center of our attention, other children tend to appear as well. Just as our own learning is supported by satisfying, if sometimes challenging, relationships with others, so too are children's. And, also like adults', children's relationships are complex, filled with needs to be both distinctive from and "just the same as" their friends. We, therefore, have emphasized that observing children in many different kinds of activities reveals, not only their resources as individuals—their interests, knowledge, and skills—but also the network of relationships that energize their lives.

Children's relationships with special others can be an important means for making school itself pleasurable and satisfying. Children can learn from each other, modeling new behaviors, cooperatively completing tasks too hard for any child alone, and raising questions that challenge and stretch each other's thinking (Rogoff, 1990). Moreover, the social talk they engage in can help children make associations between their lives inside and outside of school. Crystal, for example, learned much about reading from her good friend Rebekah, and Rebekah learned too, as she and Crystal talked together about books and about the personal experiences a book reminded them of. Further, they engaged in many activities together where neither child had the upper hand. At the same time, however, as Justin illustrated, relationships can also complicate learning. Some children may need private and safe spaces to try out new and challenging tasks, just as they need public times to display their special expertise.

Finally, we have emphasized teachers' sensitivity to the classroom community as a whole. Children need opportunities to build common ground with others, to act as special contributors to classroom life, and to link their lives to others who may, at first, seem quite different from themselves. It is this third area, we believe, that suggests the enormous potential of multicultural classrooms like Sarah's for contributing to the development of adults who may transform social inequities into new social possibilities (Greene, 1988). And it is this third area too that suggests the enormous pain teachers may feel when, in their own classrooms, such social inequities continue to play themselves out.

Children, like adults, may feel most comfortable with others who are similar to themselves in gender, race, and class. Too often, as many have documented, children who are socioculturally different come to feel undervalued, unacceptable in school (Cortes, 1986). And, despite the potential for children to learn from each other, situations where children from more mainstream backgrounds are seen exclusively or formally as "helpers" of children from less mainstream backgrounds hardly seems appropriate.

As teacher-archaeologist, then, Sarah's groundwork in Room 205 involved uncovering and developing a real sense of unique individuals, different friendship networks, and a close classroom community. This three-tiered classroom system was built largely with the tools of informal assessment: observing and listening to individual children, noting and using social relationships and interests, and encouraging open discussions among and with students. It is a circular process—the more the teacher listens to and observes the individual child or group of friends, the more she or he is able to use and develop these interests to create powerful community bonds and curriculum themes.

Room 205, then, became a community of friends working hard together and having fun. Sarah was more able to appreciate the individual differences in her class and address them because she was informally noting students' growth throughout the year. Informal assessment allowed her a fuller view of classroom life, and, thus, to better understand and support children's efforts to comfortably negotiate their shared lives as individuals, friends, and classroom citizens.

At the same time, talking and writing about informal assessment has helped us both articulate more clearly how the children's social lives mingled with the assessment process and with their academic learning. Teachers at all levels can become unsure of themselves, particularly when they open their curriculum up and allow for the sorts of student action and choice that make informal assessment meaningful. And, just as with their students, sharing experiences and reflecting and laughing about them together can provide social energy, personal confidence, and a deeper understanding of the complexities of learning.

The day Justin filled his taxi with noisy children and took off on a bumpy ride, Sarah and Anne had stood on the side of the road. Sarah wondered aloud, "See any redeeming qualities here?" If she had been alone in her own classroom, Anne would have had the same question. But, not being the teacher in charge, she answered Sarah's wry question with "Well, don't you want to see where they are going?" Through talking together, Sarah and Anne were able to turn classroom experiences into complex classroom dramas. To appreciate the dramas, they had to be patient in order to see where individual children were going and how and why—the stuff of informal assessment. On the other hand, as Sarah's question made clear, teachers are not just observers but actors in the unfolding plot who must use their observations to influence the outcome of the story for the benefit of the individual and of the community as a whole.

In closing, we recall our opening image of Sarah, gathering artifacts at the end of the day. Some twelve years since she last had a first-grade class of her own, Anne has

boxes of such stuff she can't quite throw out—letters, pictures, cards, even confiscated toy cars that somehow were not returned and freely offered gifts of small dolls and tiny teddy bears. They remind her of children's affections and concerns, and of the social dramas that take place amidst the reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. Such is the way of the teacher-archaeologist. To understand our students, we must reach, not only across the social and cultural differences that may separate their lives from our own, but back through time. We must reach that childhood place where important social dramas take place right along with the significant learning that will shape the years to come.

Like archaeologists, and the more contemporary-oriented anthropologists, we assume that our children are not wasting time or energy, even when it seems like they are. Through listening, watching, and collecting, we gain clues that allow us to understand all the kinds of problems they are working on and thereby to better support and, indeed, participate with them in the making of the future.

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